Liveability of Kuala Lumpur city centre from the perspective of urban design quality

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Abstract

Creating a liveable city is commonly a debated question. Over the last decade, the total population of people living in urban areas has increased rapidly and is expected to continue rising until 2020 where urban sprawl is anticipated. As a result, higher density has led to a high crime rate and environmental issues as a result of traffic congestion and inefficiency of the public transportation system as well as industrialization. The Malaysian Government has undertaken many initiatives such as Government Transformation Program to create a quality environment for the residents. This demonstrates that liveability is one of the main concerns towards current new development and stressing the importance of creating a liveable city that provides a safe, healthy and enjoyable place of living. This initiative is probably the reason why Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia is ranked 78th in the 2011 World Liveable City Ranking by the Economic Intelligence Units (EIU). The perception of the residents is the major contributing factor in creating a liveable place and environment because they are the real people who live, work and play in the city itself. So, it is essential to know the factors influencing the urban design quality of the city before implementing any guidelines or regulations regarding the liveability of a city. This paper discusses the policies regarding the liveability of Kuala Lumpur and how the happiness level of the urban design quality affects the liveability of the city itself.
Keywords: liveable city, Kuala Lumpur city plan, national urban policy, government transformation program, liveable city ranking, urban design quality.

1 Introduction

The Cambridge dictionary [1], refers to liveable as 'place' and 'life'. Liveability on the other hand refers to as 'the quality of being movable; capable of being moved or rearrange. Bin Ji [2] defined liveablity as the quality of life that had been experienced by the residents within a city or region where, in the context of sustainability, it is mostly heading towards the ability of the city itself to sustain the quality of life that we value or to which we aspire. In operational terms it is often viewed as enhancing the economic, social, cultural and environmental well-being of current and future residents. Most researchers agreed that liveability refers to the environment from the perspective of the individual and also includes a subjective evaluation of the quality of the place condition. The Department of Communities and Local Government in United Kingdom [3] states that liveability is also concerned with the quality of spaces and built environment which have effects on the lifestyle, health condition and many other factors. Liveable city is one that, through good planning, provides a vibrant, attractive and secure environment for people to live, work and play and encompasses good governance, a competitive economy, high quality of living and environmental sustainability [4]. The Tenth Malaysian Plan's (2010) description on liveable cities are cities that are vibrant and attractive places to live in [5]. This paper evaluates the liveability of a Malaysian city by examining the influence of urban design quality towards the liveability of a city. This is because various sources such as the Tenth Malaysian Plan identified the qualities related to urban design as a contributing factor towards liveability.

1.1 Liveable city: the concept and ranking

The concept of liveability by EIU is an assessment of the locations around the world that provide the best or the worst living conditions. Assessing liveability has a broad range of uses, from benchmarking perceptions of development levels to assigning a hardship allowance as part of the expatriate relocation packages. The EIU liveability index rates each city on a scale of 0-100 based on 30 indicators and in five categories namely stability (25%), healthcare (20%), culture and environment (25%), education (10%) and infrastructure (20%) [6].

According to the Urban Planner Advisory Team [7], more than half of the world population are living in cities and that the urban population is predicted to grow at an unprecedented rate. The statement, supported by the United Nation Population Fund (UNEFPA) in early 2007 demonstrates that for the first time in history, more than half of the world population will be living in towns and cities. By 2030 this number will swell to almost 5 billion, with the urban growth concentrated in Africa and Asia. Across the globe, governments, institutions, designers, planners, researchers and corporations are searching for ways to make cities better – using less energy and resources, fostering innovation and stronger communities, and providing populations with the most liveable environments.

Liveable city was mentioned in the recent 10th Malaysia Plan under the topic 'Building Vibrant and Livable Cities' in one of its chapters. The Malaysian

Government is aware that the quality of life in destination cities is a primary consideration for global talents in deciding where to live and work. A new approach to building vibrant and liveable cities according to the Tenth Malaysia Plan can be found in 'City Design; Transport; Environment; Activities and Culture; and Governance'. During the implementation of the Tenth Malaysia Plan, focus will be on making cities compact and efficient yet attractive and enjoyable. Furthermore, the importance of liveability in the Government Transformation Program 2010 was highlighted in the National Key Result Areas (NKRA's) and National Key Performance Indicator (NKPI), which state exactly the same criteria of the liveability e.g. reducing crime, fighting corruption, raising the standard of living and improving the efficiency urban public transport.

To maintain the quality of urban design, there is a need to create towns and cities that are distinctive with a strong identity and sense of place [9]. A quality urban design will encourage greater community participation in any activities. In addition, creating high quality architecture and urban design will significantly contribute to successful and liveable cities [10]. Thus, it is agreed that a good urban design is the foundation upon which liveable cities can be built [11]. In this paper, the residents and users of Kuala Lumpur are considered as the people who have experienced the city's sense of place, their sense of belonging, appreciation towards the cultural and heritage value through different aspects of the city physical setting and how they use the space. In the city, the daily activities are among the factors that make it alive and functional. People's reactions, identifications or perceptions of a place will depend on the type of exposure to the various kinds of settings throughout their lives.

2 Research methodology

2.1 Questionnaire survey

A sample survey was conducted with the residents of Kuala Lumpur. This research assumes that the respondents' background profile such as ethnicity, age, income and duration of living in the city does affect the happiness level towards the urban design quality overall in Kuala Lumpur City.

This research employs a questionnaire survey of 330 residents of Kuala Lumpur using multi-stage cluster sampling. Each questionnaire is divided into two parts which is Part one – Respondent's Profile; and Part two – the city's sense of place, sense of belonging and appreciation towards heritage and culture. This is supported by secondary data from Kuala Lumpur City Plan [12], National Urbanization Plan and Government Transformation Program document, and interviews with the related government agencies.

2.2 Interview survey

An interview was held with several residents of Kuala Lumpur regarding their perception of the city. The observation technique was used to study the

relationship between respondents' feedback and the actual situation in the study area. Lynch and Gary stated that direct observations can be made more efficient if we have determined the particular behaviour or activity that is of our interest [13]. The observation will include type of activities in the city such as street activities, location and also their conditions using photographic recording and mapping.

2.3 The study area

Kuala Lumpur is the capital city of Malaysia with a total area of 242.2 square feet with estimated population of 1.7 million in 2009. Kuala Lumpur is the Malaysia's premier location for business and trade.

According to the current Kuala Lumpur City Plan 2020, the city is divided into six strategic zones. This study focuses on the core characteristics of the area where the major activities are hive such as (i) the major nodes for commercial area in Kuala Lumpur, (ii) located within the diverse economic activity area, (iii) main streets of Kuala Lumpur with a high concentration of pedestrian users, shoppers and tourist. These characteristics are mainly observed in the area called 'The Golden Triangle' area.

The Golden Triangle does not have its own boundaries but usually is defined as a district where the major shopping centres, entertainment districts and offices are located. The Malaysian Travel Guide [14] identified the Golden Triangle region as covering the area of Jalan Pudu, South of Jalan Ampang and west of Jalan Imbi, and Jalan Tun Razak. The Golden Triangle also embraces the shopping area of Bukit Bintang, the office towers along Jalan Raja Chulan, entertainment area along Jalan P. Ramlee and the whole Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC), which is well known by all residents in Kuala Lumpur. It is also the most happening place with diverse activities during the day and night as well as filled with landscape and skyscrapers.
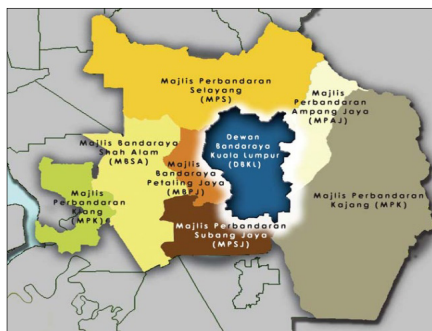

Figure 1:   Kuala Lumpur city centre map.

2.4 Data analysis

The questionnaires were processed using SPSS program and analysed using several statistical analysis techniques such as frequencies and chi square.

Frequencies data were used to show the average rates from all respondents. Chi Square analysis was used to observe the relationship between two variables whether it has a strong, weak or no relationship at all.

3 Findings

Based on the survey, the analysis and findings are used to assess the level of happiness of the residents towards the city urban design quality. According to the Applied Research in Quality of Life Journal, examples of concepts contributing directly to assessing the quality of life and social indicators include "happiness, subjective well-being, life satisfaction, the good life, the good society, economic well-being, family well-being, quality of work life, community quality of life, spiritual well-being, leisure well-being, social well-being, emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and quality of home life, among others" [15]. Based on the study on current conditions in Kuala Lumpur, the measurement that was used by 'The Auckland City Liveability Survey', which is "the happiness level", has proven to be one of the easiest measurement to use and easy to understand by the residents of Kuala Lumpur to answer the questions.

Based on this aspect, there are two parts of this survey. The first is the respondent's profile which is determined by the significance of resident's background, i.e. their length of stay in Kuala Lumpur. The second focuses more on their happiness level towards the city's sense of belonging, sense of place and appreciation towards heritage and cultural value.

3.1 Respondent profile

A stratified multistage data sampling requires an equal number of races and ages to be sampled. Cross tabulation Table 1 below shows that the research had obtained an appropriate number of respondents. A total of 339 respondents took part in this research whereby 51% are Male and 49% are female. The ratio of male and female almost accurately matches the gender ratio of the town population which is estimated to be 50.89% male and 49.11% female [15].

The Department of Statistic [15] categorised the population according to the age structure of 0–4, 5–19, 20–55, and above 55 years old group. The categorisation is based on economic productivity whereby the first group is below the working-age population (i.e. 0–4 and 5–19), the second is the population that is active in the economy (i.e. 20–55) and the third is considered as inactive economy (i.e. above 55 years old). The sampled respondent that was selected through the sampling technique represents the whole population group.

3.2 The happiness level towards the city sense of place

There are three components to be measured in the city's sense of place for a liveable city which is the city's physical aspect (Building and vegetation; and spatial organization), the city activities and the city meaning and association. The city's physical aspects is labelled with the number 1 – buildings and

Table 1:   Overall respondents of questionnaire survey.

Races	Gender				Total obtained (n) (%)
	Man (n)		Woman(n)		
	Total Real (%)	Total Obtained (%)	Total Real (%)	Total Obtained (%)	
Malay	75 22.7%	75 21.8%	72 21.9%	79 23.3%	153 45.1%
Chinese	73 22%	73 21.5%	70 21.3%	71 20.9%	144 42.5%
Indian	17 5.2%	18 5.3%	17 5.0%	18 5.3%	36 10.6%
Others	3 0.9%	1 0.3%	3 0.9%	4 1.2%	5 1.5%
Total (percentage)	168 50.9%	166 49.0%	162 49.1%	173 51.0%	339 100.0%

2 – vegetation, 3 – the city's spatial organization, 4 – the city's activities and 5 – its meanings and associations. From the linear graph below, the number of respondents with 'totally happy' is lower than 'unhappy' and 'totally unhappy' level. The result obtained from data 3 (Spatial organization) shows concern as the dot line is very close between the scale of 'unhappy' and 'happy'.

The small gap shows a concern as there is a concern occurring here even though the overall percentage shows that the respondents are happy with the city's sense of place in Kuala Lumpur. For the city's spatial arrangement, the analysis result shows that generally the respondents are unhappy to move in the city by private vehicles and also by walking. Most respondents who are unhappy are those who have lived in the city for around 1–5 years and aged above 20 years. The respondents who shared their views about moving in the city say that "*I prefer to use my private cars to go to any parts in the city as I am concerned of my safety level and the weather. Plus, public transportation in KL such as bus and LRT is not everywhere. I still need to use my own vehicle to reach the station. It is somehow frustrating even I have to face traffic jams and spent more time on the roads. I will choose to use Public transport if it is really convenient.*"

(Respondent 4, Male, Malay)

"*The systems need to be improved so that it can attract people to use public transportation without being hesitant. The current service is sometimes bad, and not following the time and sometimes I saw it is operated by a non-Malaysian. This is quite a concern. Plus, the old folks and disabled people is limited to use the public system. It is either non-structured for them or too crowded and limit their space.*"
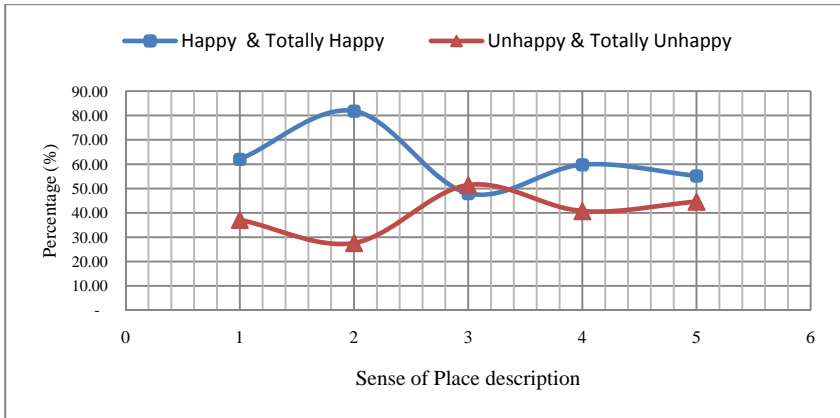
(Respondent 2, Male, Chinese)

Figure 2:   Trends of happiness level towards KL city sense of place.

3.3 The happiness level towards the city's in terms of sense of belonging

There are eight elements that are measured in the level of happiness for a sense of belonging which are (1) the ability of the respondents to voice out opinion towards the city development, (2) the city changes in overall aspect, (3) the citizens' opinion on living in the city now, (4) the urban activities, (5) the city's safety level, (6) the city changes in development, and (7) opinion on promoting the city to others. Figure 8 shows that the overall percentage of happiness level from the citizens' perspective in the quality of sense of belonging in the city of Kuala Lumpur. The result shows that, in general, the citizens are happy with the city's sense of belonging which is made up by 65.24% of overall respondents. This high percentage shows that the respondents of Kuala Lumpur do have some sort of attachment towards the city in terms of sense of belonging.

Referring to the linear graph in Figure 3, it is clearly defined that the citizens were at least happy with the city's sense of belonging except for the safety level. In the figure, it shows that the 'unhappy' line is above the 'happy' line. This shows concerns on the problems of safety that occur in KL city. The result shows that the respondents are unhappy with the city activities and the safety level and may have brought about an unliveable environment in the city itself. Earlier, it has been discussed that safety is one of the measurement that is seriously being considered by the Government in the Tenth Malaysian Plan.   The safety issues were caused by how the activities in the cities were arranged. One respondent gives a view about the safety issues, "*I believe that safety is an issue derived in all cities all over the world. This result somehow shows concern to the government to take it as a serious matter, as for me, who is living in KL all by myself am not feeling safe. But not all places aren't safe, only a few.*"

(Respondent 2, Male, Chinese)

"*I am paranoid with the idea of walking in KL city centre. I don't feel safe at all. And I think there is too much stories about robbery and all. Even eating at*

'local mamak' also has its own disadvantages. It causes an alarm and have to beware."

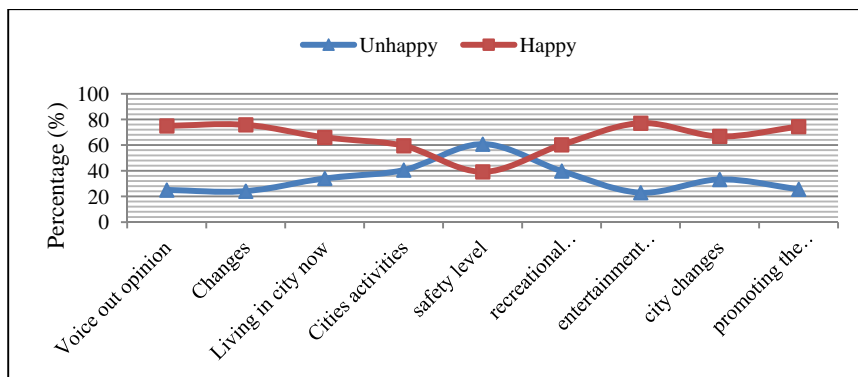*(Respondent 14, Male, Malay)*

Figure 3:   Trends for happiness level of the city sense of belonging.

3.4 The happiness level towards the appreciation of heritage and cultural value

There were five components asked regarding resident's appreciation towards their heritage and cultural value, which is (1) practising prayers and rituals, (2) their opinion on protecting the prayers and ritual, (3) opinion on wearing national dress, (4) the existence of heritage buildings and (5) the memory given by the heritage building. The straight line in the Figure 4 below shows steady proportion of the respondents' happiness level. The result shows that the total happiness level for this attribute is at the highest (more than 80%). The result shows that the respondents appreciate the cultural elements and heritage values that are still in existence in the city.
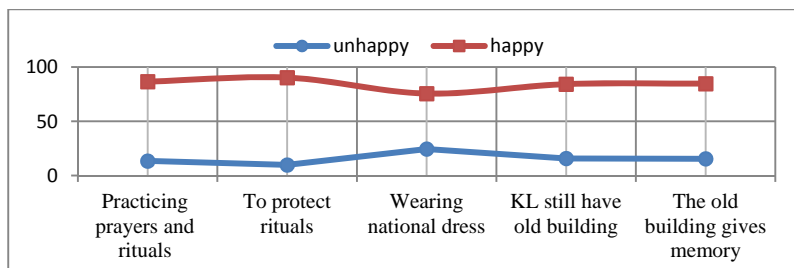

Figure 4:   Trends for happiness level of the city heritage and cultural value.

However, there are concerns raised by the respondents with regards to the city's old buildings. The respondents demonstrated their concerns on how the old buildings in Kuala Lumpur are being slowly demolished.

"*I only noticed certain heritage elements in the city such as Sultan Abdul Samad Building and the Old KTM station because it is the most obvious structure located at the heart of KL. And also Jalan TAR because it's famous. Either than that, I am not sure.*"

(Respondent 5, Female, Malay)

"*I feel that the city hall fails to protect the old building and highlighting its heritage value. Some of the new construction has demolished the original face and shape and now it look different than 40 years ago. I am sad looking how destruction happened in the city, and I think half of the memories has already gone*".

(Respondent 9, Male, Malay)

Thus, it is an obligation for the City Hall, to protect the area with extra caution so that the city will not lose its heritage value and historical significance.

4 Conclusion

The research shows that the respondents who live and stay in Kuala Lumpur are happy with the city's urban design quality. This is neglected by the response given to the three components that are used to measure urban design quality, namely the sense of place, sense of belonging and appreciation towards cultural and heritage value. Out of the three components, appreciation towards the cultural and heritage value scored the highest happiness level whilst sense of place scored the lowest. This finding is consistent with the current development of cities in Malaysia where many urban areas lack of sense of place and identity except for a few heritage cities. Prior to the introduction of the National Heritage Act in 2005, there was a lack of concern to safeguard and conserve the heritage of the country. However, recent development has demonstrated more concern on conserving the built heritage especially in major cities like Kuala Lumpur, the heritage cities George Town and Malacca. In order to increase the liveability of Malaysian cities, more efforts are needed to improve the urban design quality especially with regards to the sense of place of the cities. This is to ensure that more cities will be liveable that will have an effect on economic activities as well as attracting foreign investment into the country.

Acknowledgements

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